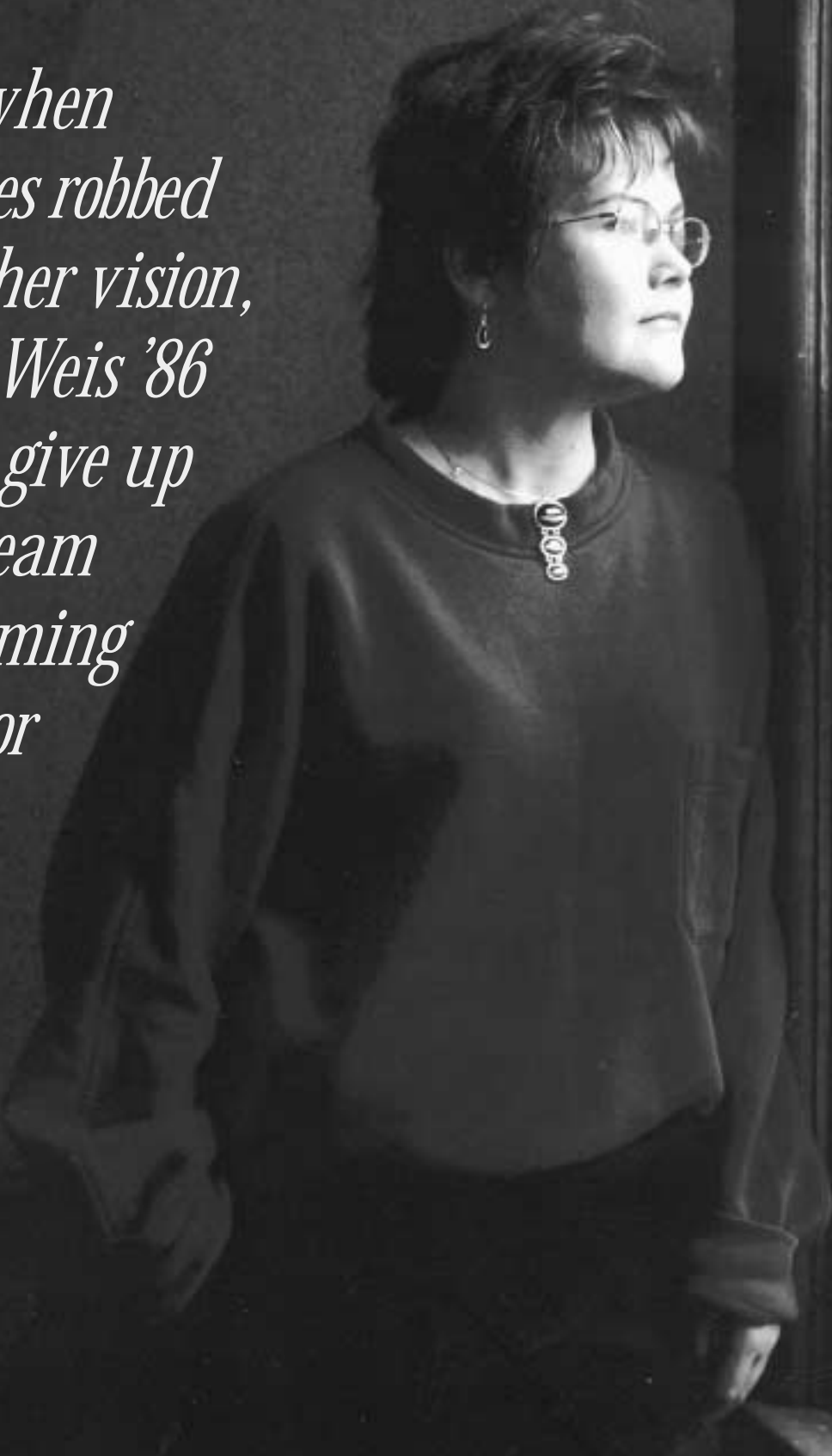


Against all odds

*Even when
diabetes robbed
her of her vision,
Diane Weis '86
didn't give up
her dream
of becoming
a doctor*





Diane Weis '86 decided she wanted to be a doctor in 1968. She was 7 years old.

She announced her intentions that year to her pediatrician while in the hospital in Oshkosh, Wis., where she was diagnosed with diabetes. The doctor wasn't encouraging about her aspirations.

"You're a nice little girl, but be a nurse," she recalls him saying. Diane says it was the doctor's way of politely telling her that she probably wouldn't live long enough to make it through medical school.

No one thought it was possible for her to become a doctor. Few encouraged her, especially after she lost her vision.

Three and a half years of blindness was just one obstacle. Those closest to her witnessed the nightly seizures and loss of consciousness as she struggled to regulate her insulin levels and high blood pressure.

Many say the fact that Diane is a practicing doctor for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic in Springfield, Ill., is nothing short of a miracle, or a series of miracles and examples of God's grace.

"It is a miracle where she is now," says her brother, Gus Weis, who manages the family's dairy farm near Berlin, Wis. "Hell wouldn't be a good enough description of what she went through. It was worse than hell."

Many also say her accomplishments are testi-

mony to her unwavering determination and faith. "There was just a drive inside me," says Diane, 43. "I can't tell you why or how."

Her drive to excel began early. In kindergarten, she sometimes became physically ill when a project wasn't perfect. Diane says she vomited a few times throughout her school years when she didn't reach perfection.

She was determined to get straight A's in high school and college so she would be accepted to medical school. She says she often slept less than four hours a night and refused to participate in family game and movie nights. She now wonders if the lack of sleep and tendency to push the limit contributed to her high blood pressure and blindness.

Diane was 21 when she lost her sight. It was March 1982, and she was a junior at Ripon College, about seven miles from her parents' home in Rush Lake, Wis., where she was living.

One day, when she bent down to put something away, she noticed a dark spot that moved in her left eye. Eventually, the dark spot grew to blindness in the left eye. Within a few months, she lost sight in the right eye, too.

Diane has Type 1 or juvenile-onset diabetes, which causes the body to stop producing insulin. Diabetics often develop diabetic retinopathy, a condition that makes small blood vessels in the

Diane Weis '86, center right, enjoys a meal with her family at her parents' farm in Rush Lake, Wis. Her siblings, including Gus, second from left, and Darlene, right, played an integral role in her life when she was young, doing everything from helping her when she had low-insulin reactions at night to taking notes for her during college when she was blind.

Photo courtesy of The State Journal-Register



Dr. Diane Weis '86 works in her exam room at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic in Springfield. Weis has been practicing internal medicine since graduating from medical school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1997.

Photo courtesy of The State Journal-Register

eyes weaken and leak blood. The American Diabetes Association says diabetes is responsible for eight percent of legal blindness, making it the leading cause of blindness in adults 20 to 74 years old. Each year, as many as 24,000 diabetics lose their sight.

Gus, who is six years younger than his sister, was 15 when she lost her sight. He says blindness wasn't the worst of her problems. You can be blind and live. He was with her while she battled unstable insulin levels, searched for the right medication to lower her blood pressure and suffered through many drug reactions.

For years, Gus wasn't sure if his sister would make it through the night. Diane's blood sugar often would drop to dangerous levels without warning. Gus and sister Darlene remember the terrible screeching sound Diane would make as she fell into unconsciousness.

The screeching or the pounding of Diane's legs and arms against the wall would wake Gus and Darlene in the middle of the night as they slept in adjacent bedrooms on the second floor of the 70-year-old farmhouse.

"It would scare the living daylights out of us," Gus says.

Gus was the one who learned how to coax Diane to open her mouth when it was clenched shut, so she could swallow orange juice to make

her blood sugar rise.

A few times, when that didn't work, Gus threw Diane over his shoulder and carried her to the car so their father, Norm Weis, could drive 85 miles an hour to the hospital about seven miles into town.

"It was a job," Gus says. "It didn't happen every night. It seemed like every night."

While Gus was the rescuer if Diane slipped into unconsciousness, other family members took on different roles to help Diane. Another sister, Debbie Jansen, who was already married with children, drove Diane to her doctor's appointments.

Diane's mother, Marilyn, was the quiet supporter and coordinator of Diane's care. Diane's father, Norm, was the steadfast support, who managed the family's dairy farm and made sure Diane had the best medical care they could afford and no financial worries.

Sister Darlene Rasmussen, who is two years younger than Diane, helped Diane complete her undergraduate degree. Darlene drove her to her classes at Ripon.

Diane refused to learn Braille or walk with a cane. "I was too stubborn," Diane says. "I didn't want anyone to know that anything was wrong."

Darlene counted the number of paces between the campus buildings and then up the stairs to the classroom. Diane used that, in part, as a guide to

get from class to class. Sometimes, she would trip over students who sat on the stairs, blocking her path.

She refused to give up. In the classroom, Diane taped the lectures. Then, Darlene would type the notes, read them back to Diane and quiz her. Several professors tutored her, teaching her organic chemistry by making her models that she could feel.

Diane couldn't read during the three and a half years of blindness, but she went to bed most nights holding her Bible, she says, and listened to Scripture readings on cassette tapes.

"I kept praying, 'If you want me to do something, Lord, help me to find something that I really enjoy,'" Diane says. "God just showed me such a desire to be a doctor from (when I was) little on."

Diane's parents sell dairy cattle and attend dairy shows. Her mother says hundreds of friends throughout the United States prayed for Diane for years. "She was a very sick girl," Marilyn says. "Everyone was very concerned."

One day in the spring of 1985, a few months after beginning a new medication for high blood pressure, Diane's blood pressure dropped to near-normal range and the sight in her right eye began to return. She was 24.

The improvement was gradual. She would wake up in the morning and see some light and objects around her.

Then, Diane says, she was sitting at the kitchen table one morning when she noticed "chunks of blood" moving in her right eye. The blood settled and the veil that covered her right eye disappeared.

"I could see clear across the table," Diane says. "I was shocked. I was afraid to move."

She has been able to see from her right eye ever since. She still does not have vision in the left eye, in which the retina is detached.

"The doctors in Madison said only an act of God could have made this happen," Diane's father, Norm, says. "No one gets their sight back after this long."

Dr. Frank Myers, a retired ophthalmologist and specialist in diabetic retinopathy at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, treated Diane. He says it is rare for a diabetic with significant changes in the blood vessels in the eye to spontaneously improve. Moreover, most of the time, if the retina detaches in one eye, it usually detaches in the other eye, too.

"I've had a few cases similar to this, but the improvement wasn't as spectacular and no one has

gone on to do the things Diane has done," Myers says.

That spring, Diane completed her undergraduate degree in biology.

Diane says she wouldn't have the degree without Darlene's dedication.

"It was a joke at (Diane's) college graduation that I should have gotten a degree, too," Darlene says. She says school counselors tell her there was a better use of her time than bringing her sister to school every day. Her answer to that: "Diane was never a burden. I don't think it was anything exceptional I did, either. This is just life. This is how it is. It was just what a family does."

While Diane's family supported her through her blindness and the completion of her bachelor's degree, they had difficulty understanding her determination to go to medical school after everything she had been through.

She had a new blood-pressure medication and a better handle on her insulin levels, but Diane continued to have problems regulating the insulin that she injected daily.

Her family worried that she wouldn't make it through the night if she lived on her own. They begged her to give up the fight and to stay on the 1,000-acre dairy farm, where the rolling hills, beautiful trees and the daily family routine offered peace and security.

"All we wanted her to do is to live and to be with us," Gus says.

Her father recalls her reaction: "She said she would rather be dead than sit at home."

Diane may be petite and soft-spoken compared to her taller and sturdier sisters and brother, but she was the rebel, she says. She was the only child who wanted to leave the farm.

Her mother says they suggested other careers in nursing, education or religion. "She wouldn't settle for anything else," Marilyn says.

Diane listened to her family's advice for a while. She needed time to recuperate. Three and a half years of blindness and reactions to medications had taken its toll. She slept 20 hours every day for four years.

"I couldn't walk across the street," she says.

She applied for graduate school and considered genetic counseling. She was turned down. The admissions counselor said it sounded like she really wanted to pursue medical school.

She continued to take classes to prepare for medical school entrance exams, but when she was ready to take the exams, her mother refused to write a check to pay for it. Diane, who didn't have her own bank account, says she had to ask a friend



Diane prays during a Bible study group at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Springfield. Faith is an important aspect of Diane's life, and both she and her family attribute her success and determination to the grace of God.

Photo courtesy of The State Journal-Register

to endorse her work-study payroll check to cover the cost.

She scored well on the exams, but still didn't receive much encouragement.

A Ripon professor convinced her to try podiatry school, suggesting it would be a less rigorous program. She gave in and entered a podiatry school in Des Moines, Iowa. It was the first turning point for her: Diane would move away from the family whose love and dedication saved her life.

She stayed for two of the four years required for the podiatry program. She realized podiatry wasn't her calling, so she dropped out.

"I just couldn't look at people's feet anymore," Diane says. "I'd see a diabetic's foot and begin asking how their blood sugar levels are doing. Then they would say, 'Can you just take care of my toenails?'"

She had to wait a year to apply to medical school and retake the entrance exams.

"At that point, we all turned," her mother says. The family accepted that Diane would attend medical school. "There was no other job in the world she could do and be happy," Marilyn says.

Six years had passed since Diane had graduated from Ripon. Diane says several people advised her not to mention diabetes in the entrance essay.

"I decided that if they can't accept me for what

I am, then I don't belong there," Diane says. She was denied entrance to several medical schools, but was accepted to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

She entered medical school with casts on both feet and legs. The fractures were another complication, the result of an overactive gland that depleted calcium.

"It is sort of surprising that she was even admitted to medical school," says Myers, the retired doctor and faculty member at the University of Wisconsin who treated Diane. "They would take into consideration whether they believed she could finish."

Tears well in Diane's father's eyes as he recalls her medical school graduation in 1997. The proud farmer has trouble describing his own feelings, but says he won't forget the excitement of his sister, Naomi Schuster, at Diane's graduation. "I never have attended a doctor's graduation before," Schuster had said.

Diane's insulin difficulties are less frequent since 1996, when she began using an insulin pump that regularly dispenses doses of insulin throughout the day. That helped the following year when she moved to Peoria for her residency in internal medicine and pediatrics.

In many ways, the residency was more difficult than medical school, Diane says. The hours were long. Her feet fractured four more times during her residency.

Diane began practicing internal medicine at the veterans' clinic in Springfield in 2001. She was 40 — at least 10 years older than most beginning doctors. She says about 75 percent of her patients are diabetic. Many have challenging complications that she personally understands.

"I had so many obstacles," Diane says. "I just knew God had a purpose for me. I know I am supposed to be a doctor." **R**

Theresa Grimaldi Olsen

Olsen operates her own freelance business, Olsen Communications, in Springfield, Ill. This story appeared in Heartland Magazine, a publication of the The State-Journal Register of Springfield, in December 2004 and is reprinted with permission of Copley Press, Inc.

One in 4,500, if not a million

Rich Scamehorn estimates that he has taught more than 4,500 students in his 37 years as a professor of chemistry at Ripon.

No student, says Scamehorn who retired in May, had the level of determination that he saw in Diane Weis '86.

Weis was a junior when she lost her sight. It was the spring semester of 1982 and she was taking Scamehorn's biochemistry class. At first, she could see some things on the board, but her sight became worse throughout the semester. Scamehorn helped Weis understand chemistry by making models that she could feel.

Understanding the three-dimensional aspect of organic chemistry is important, Scamehorn says. He tutored Weis for one to two hours a week.

He also remembers that Diane's sister, Darlene, read the textbook to Weis and brought her to class every day.

"It was a real dedicated effort," he says. "Her sister always brought her to class."

"Weis could not participate in the lab," Scamehorn says. "She couldn't see well enough to work safely in the lab."

Despite her blindness, Weis received an A in the class, Scamehorn says. "I'm not known to give many A's. That was a pretty big deal. We thought that was pretty amazing."

Weis says Scamehorn's willingness to spend extra time with

her after class made all the difference. She says other teachers, such as Bob Wallace in microbiology, Jean Tyrone in biology, and the late chemistry professor Earle Scott all were helpful.



Professor of Chemistry Emeritus Rich Scamehorn, shown here in 2003 with Karl Leistikow '03, epitomized the type of individualized faculty-student interaction that Ripon is known for. It was that type of personal attention that Diane Weis says made the difference for her.

Jim Koepnick photo

"They were very receptive and helpful if you wanted it," Weis says. "They said, 'whatever you need, I'll do.'"

Scamehorn says he knew Diane through her family before she was in his class. Scamehorn and the Weis family attended Immanuel United Methodist Church in Ripon. Diane's brother, Gus, and Scamehorn's son, David, were in the same Sunday school class as youngsters and later played on rival high school football teams — David for Ripon and Gus for Berlin.

Weis talked about being a doctor when she was a student at Ripon, Scamehorn says. "She was very dedicated to what she was doing, and she was very intense about it. Her goal was to become a doctor."

The determination that Weis displayed was amazing, Scamehorn says: "It sets her apart from anyone else I have ever encountered. Most people would have given up."

Weis' sight returned after she finished biochemistry and within weeks of graduation from Ripon. It took three years to complete her junior and senior years after she lost her sight. Still, she graduated from Ripon with honors. Six years later she entered medical school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Theresa Grimaldi Olsen